Closing the gulf between press and government

By Clive Irving

A gulf between government and journalism is a gulf between government and people. The gulf between Downing Street and Fleet Street (and the broadcasting organizations) is greater now than it has been since the nadir of the Macmillan administration in 1963, though the nature of the disaffection is different. This is bad for the Government, bad for journalism and serious for the country.

There are two basic postures which have been struck by extremists on both sides. The Government, and particularly one or two senior Ministers, believe that there is a conspiracy among the newspaper proprietors to undermine them in any way possible—not out of political disenchantment but because their own financial ends are being frustrated.

The press, on the other hand, suspects that the executive, always intemperate in the face of criticism, is intent on extending its own powers at the expense of the licence which makes that criticism possible, and is being abetted in this by a Government which has become unduly paranoid.

So what's new about this? Are not these conflicting tensions the very essence of our democracy? Perhaps, but although it is essential to recognize that the interests of the two groups are not only different but often in conflict, they are now so mutually distrustful that the system is beginning to break down. The situation must be retrieved.

Of course, press Lords have from time to time abused their power. Northcliffe's disgraceful campaign against Leverhulme was one of the earliest examples; and Baldwin's classic "power without responsibility" reply to persecution was merited. But at the same time, that power was usually grossly overrated, as any assessment of Beaverbrook's life is bound to show—his power politically declined in almost exact proportion to the growth of his newspaper empire.

FUNDAMENTAL ROLE

No proprietor today cherishes Beaverbrookian delusions of being able to make or break a government. Certainly, they declare their support at the time of general elections, though it is doubtful whether that has more than a marginal impact either way. But that is not, and could not be, a guarantee of blind and continuing uncritical allegiance. In 1963 Mr. Macmillan was ultimately estranged even from *The Daily Telegraph*; today Mr. Cecil King is accused of betrayal by Ministers because of the degree of disenchantment which the *Daily Mirror* shows with the Wilson Government, which they pushed into office in 1964 and endorsed more cautiously in 1966.

This petulant reaction by Ministers reveals an ingenuous misunderstanding of the nature of journalism. To some degree, newspapers must always be in opposition. Journalism, whatever the political stance of a particular paper, is—if it plays its proper democratic role—basically a radical state of mind, demanding the practice of a professional independence completely separate from the individual's private affections.

It seems increasingly difficult to get this point home to Mr. Wilson and his colleagues. On Sunday Mr. Richard Crossman revived in a radio interview the traditional Socialist suspicion that the press was inevitably hostile to them because of their radicalism. This is nonsense. There has been a wide degree of support for the Government's reforming legislation which has been an adequate demonstration of the press's own radicalism.

One component of the Government's persecution complex is their resentment because correspondents who seemed friendly in the days of opposition have become "turncoats". This simple-minded idea that relationships remain unaltered by power, and that a journalist's scepticism is somehow suspended if his friends are in office, lies at the root of the hysteria which Mr. Chapman Pincher's devastating contempt for the D Notice system caused in Downing Street.

Another manifestation of the kind of innocence which leads to extraordinarily intolerant and repressive instincts was Mr. George Brown's sensitivity over *The Sunday Times's* Philby disclosures. For Mr. Brown, this became an issue of patriotism: that by disclosing the sustained ineptitude of the security services the country had been damaged for the sake of circulation-building scandal. This really won't do.

COST OF PROTECTION

The most alarming concomitant of Mr. Brown's argument is that, whatever the period and however great the ineptitude, malfunctions of the security services should never be open to public accountability. This, as often happened in the application of D Notices, is taking the cover of security too far. The very duration of the Philby adventure shows the cost of this kind of protection. And are we honestly to believe that the exposure of this old dirty linen in public will not, in the long run, increase the efficacy of the security services?

Mr. Brown seems, uncharacteristically, to have fallen under the spell of permanent officials to whom any kind of public scrutiny is anathema. *The Sunday Times* inquiry was at pains not to trespass into areas which might in any way have compromised the contemporary machinery of security. The cast of mind which found this inquiry offensive has much in common with the cast of mind responsible for the Philby blunders in the first place.

Apart from the old worry that Fleet Street is predominantly Tory, all the other sensitivities about the press evident in this administration are common to both major parties; when the roles were reversed Mr. Brown went after the Macmillan Government in the Vassall case with all the dedication that *The Sunday Times* employed in the Philby affair. Mr. Macmillan's ultimate estrangement from Conservative newspapers arose from a sulking introversion in which he made no effort to listen to his own supporters. For a few months, culminating with the Profumo affair, the Prime Minister seemed to be trying to make a virtue of being out of touch; and this, in the end, contributed to his downfall.

Mr. Wilson has not yet retreated that far. His "white Commonwealth", the small group of favourites among the lobby correspondents who take his leaks and fly his kites, are becoming an increasingly nervous clique of uncertain loyalty and composition. The Chalfont affair has pointed once again to the dangers of the "off the record" and "non-attributable" system, particularly when a Minister attempts to use it as a device for making newspapers the lightning conductor for the Government.

There is no shortage of incidents to underline the maladroitness of the Government in its attempts at news management. But the fault is not all on one side. Why on earth, for example, did the *Daily Express* sabotage its own good case, thanks to Mr. Pincher, in the D Notice affair by publishing, with childish bravado, the names of British

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security chiefs on the grounds that they had been printed in the United States ?

Whatever the absurdity of concealing these names, the *Express* seemed merely to be making sensational capital out of somebody else's work ; whereas the only legitimate justification for ignoring D Notices must be if a paper has information of its own collection which, after careful assessment, it judges to be in the national interest to disclose—as were Mr. Pincher's story on the censoring of cables, and the Philby facts.

The public, ultimately, is the loser in this demeaning squabble between the two estates. They are showing their disaffection with politics as a whole, and not only the governing party's survival is in question because of this total breakdown in communications ; the public is out of sympathy with government of whatever flavour. Newspapers have just as much of a responsibility to correct this as have the politicians.

Lord Radcliffe wrote scathingly to *The Times* of the declining standards of public administration. This deteriorating climate has been caused largely by lack of communication. Bureaucrats are insensitive to public opinion because they are not exposed enough to it ; commentators sometimes are not as well informed as they should be because all the facts are not made accessible to them when they might easily be.

Politicians mistakenly think that journalists are politicians *manqué* and carry chips on their shoulders because of it. Journalists frequently have contempt for politicians because they are either impotent on the back benches or the prisoners of civil servants in their departments. Civil servants are jealous of their intellectual detachment, suspect the motivation of politicians and object to the journalist's necessary gift for simplification. These recriminations revolve in a self-sustaining whirlpool of misunderstanding. This centrifugal force has driven apart the bedfellows of democracy. How can they be brought together again ?

ABANDONED POLICY

The Government, if it can find it within its nature, must abandon its paranoia and its favouritism, and it must not think that its patronage carries any obligation of uncritical servility. When he came to power, Mr. Wilson had some bold and imaginative things to say about bringing the people nearer to government by doing more to explain its workings. It is a pity that this enlightened approach was swiftly abandoned under the pressures of office.

Politicians are not in office to protect the machinery of government, but to use and improve it. Alarm at galloping public expenditure will be allayed only if there is adequate assurance that it is being wisely spent, and that cannot exist while the apparatus to check it acts only retrospectively, after it is too late to correct mistakes. Individuals within that machinery must be publicly accountable, and feel as accountable as Ministers themselves.

Parliament must really be opened up to the public, not to the token extent now possible. Nervous half-measures like the current scheme to have closed-circuit broadcasts from the chamber are not enough : television must be allowed in, both for selective live transmissions and for taped and edited reports. No single act could do more to give the public a real sense of contact and participation in national affairs, and the newspapers have no need to fear that this undermines their role in providing a record.

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